

Roblox Meets Minecraft™ in China's LEGO® Cube

In many ways, LEGO Cube is the ultimate realization of what the LEGO Group is trying to achieve with its games. It delivers a fully explorable LEGO brick world where fans can explore, interact, and – perhaps most importantly – create.

The only problem is that the mobile game is currently stuck in a sort of release limbo as it awaits approval from the Chinese government. The companies involved – The LEGO Group, Tencent, and NExT Studios – are weighing next steps, even as they continue to support the beta-locked title.



At a minimum, the LEGO Group's Sean McEvoy says that the company has learned a lot from creating the mobile-first title.

"I think one thing that has really been evident to us as a team, and via our partnership with Tencent, is that there are tremendous learnings in terms of play experiences that could be broadly extensible worldwide to an audience of fans of LEGO play anywhere in the world," he said. "Those learnings do not have to stay exclusive to Mainland China, they're extensible worldwide, and so even if the game stays within the borders of Mainland China, we really feel like there are global benefits to that experience in social creative play, and in bringing world class experiences of child safety, and structures for fair and transparent monetization."

LEGO Cube started out about six years ago as a loose idea to publish a game in China, developed by a Chinese developer for a Chinese market.

That eventually led to the LEGO Group setting up shop in China and – after an extensive search that included speaking with 15 companies – partnering with Tencent and its developer NExT Studios to make a game.

Once the LEGO Group found its partner, the companies spent another six months or so essentially getting to know one another and, in the words of the LEGO Group's Micki Fjeldgaard, immersing Tencent in LEGO Games culture.

"A natural sort of like first step was obviously to introduce them to our many guidelines and manuals or documentation as to what kind of ways do you present the minifigure?" he said. "How do you animate the minifigure? How do you portray various types of conflict? How do you best deal with combat in a child-friendly game, and stuff like that. Following that, and sort of like getting a shared understanding of what this is, we then had multiple creative workshops in Shenzhen in Tencent's office around the game and explored various avenues as to how we could incorporate creativity and imagination into the game."

Initially, the game that NExT was working on leaned heavily into combat, but as time went by, the game opened up to be more creative and became something that incorporated more creativity, choice, and building into the experience.

LEGO Cube isn't just an important part of the LEGO Group's gaming strategy, but its overall strategy in China. And China is a huge market for the LEGO Group.

LEGO bricks have been a beloved part of play for kids and adults for generations. That's not the case in China, though, where LEGO bricks didn't officially arrive until 1993 with the opening of a small third-party store in Beijing. In 2001, the company lined up an exclusive distributor from mainland China, and 15 years later in 2016, the LEGO Group launched its first flagship store there – a gorgeous, two-floor store by Disneyland in Shanghai. The LEGO Group now has four flagship stores in China and plans to greatly increase the number of stores there by the end of 2021. The company's expansion into China also includes growing digital efforts – and, of course, video games.

McEvoy said that China is "hugely important" to LEGO Games, and LEGO Cube is a big element of that effort.

As of 2020, China is the largest market in the world for video games, accounting for more than 27% of global revenue for the video game industry. That's 2% more than North America, which is now the second biggest, and 5% more than Asia-Pacific, which is the third largest. It's also important to note how quickly game industry revenue grew in China. In the past 10 years, total China game industry revenue grew by about 760%. And much of that growth is in mobile games.

As of 2020, the games market in China was about 80 percent mobile. So it's easy to see why LEGO Cube, a mobile-first game designed for China, in China, is so important.

LEGO Cube is an open-ended sandbox game that is best described as taking the best of LEGO Worlds combined with the best of Minecraft, and combine that with the best of Roblox, built for mobile first.

"It sort of has these inherit LEGO values in its core design, which was all about creativity and open-ended play and exploration," said the LEGO Group's Ronny Scherer. "And that combined with a platform of which players could make their own worlds and share those with the rest of the player community in an easy way from your mobile device."

In late 2017, Scherer recruited the LEGO Group's first local employee in China: Long Cao. It was Cao's job to ensure that the game stayed on schedule and that it was tested and prepared for launch as soon as possible. Joining Cao shortly after was Nannan Li, as associate product lead on the game.

When both Li and Cao started, LEGO Cube was still very much in the early stages of development. About 30 people were working on the game, which hadn't yet been announced. The game was officially unveiled in September 2018, about a year after Scherer moved to China. In the announcement, the LEGO Group called LEGO Cube the first game developed under the strategic partnership between the LEGO Group and Tencent and noted that the game was expected to be publicly available by the end of 2018. With the release window now public, Li said that development and recruitment for the game's dev team sped up, eventually hitting about 70 employees.

The team did several closed tests for LEGO Cube, and then the game was soft launched on August 8th, 2019, an auspicious date in China because the number 8 is considered lucky. And that luck seemed to hold – at least for a while.

"LEGO Cube and soft launch has done phenomenally well by our standards," Scherer said. "It's been consistently in the top three performing titles in terms of reaching engagement."

Currently, the game features four major modes. In survival mode, players explore the world, collect materials, and craft tools they use to create other items that help them survive. Then there is the user-generated content platform, which allows players to create their own experiences within games inside the game, and then invite players to come and play their created games with them. Next is creation mode, which gives players plenty of open space, all of the bricks they want, and allows them to build anything they can imagine. The final mode is parties, which features the LEGO Park, a land where you can build your house and live a minifig life.

What the game doesn't feature – at least not yet – is a way to make money. That's because it still hasn't officially been released.

Nearly two years since it first went live, LEGO Cube remains, essentially, half launched. That's because it's awaiting final approval from the Chinese government.

"In order to release a game with a foreign brand in China, you need to acquire two different kinds of permits," Scherer said. "One is an ISBN license that's akin to an ISBN

license in the West for releases of books and what have you. The second part is a publishing license, which you cannot, for either of them, acquire that as a foreign company. You need to be a Chinese-owned entity in order to apply for and receive those permits."

To obtain those licenses in China, a company has to go through companies that the local government trusts will respect Chinese culture and local regulation. That's true of anything that conveys any sort of message to the public or allows the public to communicate with one another. But internet culture products are considered even more sensitive. A game like LEGO Cube needs this prior approval but can in some cases still be soft launched to the public for testing, if it follows the regulatory requirements and does not charge its players without all of the approvals.

Now drop into this complex release system a change that hit in early 2018 when there was an organizational restructure within the Chinese group that led the approval process. That led to a temporary freeze in the authorization of new game licenses, which lasted for the rest of the year. And then in 2019, China enacted new laws regulating video game playing time for minors, which also must be addressed in game design.

While the approval process is once again active, the change in regulation and licensing has created challenges for games not yet approved and a longer delay for those seeking approval. Essentially, there's a line to get approval, and LEGO Cube is still waiting in it.

"So right now, our goal is to find a way to sustain the game for long enough that we'll be able to monetize it eventually," Scherer said.

"Currently, that doesn't include releasing the game outside China," said McEvoy.

While the game isn't officially released yet, it does enjoy a passionate following. That's in part because players can make their own creations in the game and share them with one another.

The LEGO Group said it also feels like what it's learned from the experience and the partnership has been more than worthwhile, regardless of the outcome for the game.

"I think this game itself is really great," Nannan Li said. "It's a huge engagement for the LEGO brand with players and kids in China because, compared with other Western countries, the LEGO Group as a toy brand is fairly new for Chinese consumers and players. I'm really happy to see that we finally brought a LEGO title and fully developed for China to the Chinese market."

Explore more...

In order of appearance:

[LEGO Minifigures Online](#) – LEGO Minifigures Don't Have Knees

[LEGO Universe](#) – Death of a Dream

[LEGO Worlds](#) – Wikipedia

[Tencent](#) – Official website

[NExT Studios](#) – Official website

Transcript

Bits N' Bricks Season 2 Episode 27 • Roblox Meets Minecraft™ in China's LEGO® Cube

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Prologue – 00:00

Announcer

Please note that this episode of Bits N' Bricks contains instances of misuse of the LEGO trademark, which must always be used as an adjective and never a noun. As a reminder, it is never appropriate to refer to the company that designs and produces LEGO brand products as LEGO. Rather, the correct name for the company overall is the LEGO Group.

Announcer

I hope that was severe enough. Was it severe enough?

Studio Engineer

Yeah that was great, Ben. We got it.

Announcer

Alright. On with the show.

(Child's voice announcing Bits N' Bricks)

Bits N' Bricks: Introduction – 00:39

Ethan Vincent

Welcome to Bits N' Bricks, a podcast about all things LEGO games. I'm Ethan Vincent.

Brian Crecente

And I'm Brian Crecente. Together we look back at the rich 25-year history of LEGO games, chat with early developers and seasoned studios, who have all tackled the creation of video games for one of the most popular and respected toy companies in the world: the LEGO Group.

(Season 2 Bits N' Bricks theme music)

Brian Crecente

I've been spending a lot of time lately checking out this new LEGO game. It drops you into this massive world of beautiful grass fields, welcoming crystal blue lakes, car-sized flowers, waterfalls, mountains, trees, and of course it's all made of LEGO bricks.

Ethan Vincent

That sounds amazing.

Brian Crecente

You know it really is. Unfortunately, it's not something everyone can play.

Ethan Vincent

Ah, you're talking about LEGO Cube, aren't you?

Brian Crecente

I am! LEGO Cube is currently in open beta testing in China only, and it also happens to be the subject of this week's episode.

Ethan Vincent

Yes, we are going to be talking about why the LEGO Group decided to invest in a game designed, at least initially, for release in China only, how the company went about finding the right partner, and the work that went into creating the game.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, and we're also going to be diving a bit into some of the unique challenges of developing and publishing a game in China.

(Music from LEGO Cube)

Chapter 1: History of LEGO Cube – 02:13

Brian Crecente

So when I first started playing LEGO Cube, you know it reminded me, Ethan, a lot of the super popular game Minecraft and also a little bit of Roblox.

Ethan Vincent

Yes, why would you say that is?

Brian Crecente

Well, you know, for the same reason that Minecraft initially reminded me of LEGO bricks, funny enough. The LEGO Cube is this construction game, and like Roblox, it has these sort of deep roots in user-generated content, playing together online, and of course, it also draws at least some inspiration from some amazing LEGO games that came before it. If you spend any time in the colorful landscapes of LEGO Cube, you can't help but start to think about things like LEGO Worlds, or LEGO Minifigures Online, or even, Ethan, LEGO Universe.

(Music from LEGO Universe)

Ethan Vincent

Oh, yes, LEGO Universe. How can we forget that, right? When it launched in 2010, LEGO Universe let players build their own creations in the shared spaces called properties, even though the game was more focused on exploration and role playing in a multiplayer setting. And 2015 LEGO's Minifigures Online delivered colorful adventures to the world of LEGO bricks. The most influential LEGO game in LEGO Cube's design, though, released in 2017, LEGO Worlds put LEGO bricks and minifigs into the world of sandbox games delivering massive open 3D procedurally generated spaces where players could explore and build. But in 2015, around the same time TT Games and the LEGO Group were announcing Worlds to the public, another project set for a China-only release was quietly beginning to build steam with the help of the LEGO Group's Micki Fjeldgaard.

Micki Fjeldgaard

I was approached about six years ago, with the opportunity to move to China, and help set up the Asia Pacific market. And in connection with that, we were looking for various partners in China, as well as publishers for video games in China. And it was part of spearheading those efforts. We had some ideas towards what we would like to introduce on the market, but we didn't have any concrete at the moment. So it was really, you know, built from the ground up – finding partners, finding a publishing partner, coming up with a great concept that was a fit for the partner as well as for us, and then hopefully get that launched in the market. I think at the very get-go of the LEGO Group moving into China, it was quite clear that we did not have the same history with customers in China as we had in the Western world, and therefore, there was a need to explain the brand itself from the ground up, and its uniqueness and its unique proposition and benefits. And so a lot more marketing went into, to sort of like, starting from scratch and telling all of the stories of the LEGO Group from the ground up.

(Video "LEGO Bricks in the Making")

Narrator: The LEGO brick is an old invention by now.
The first plastic brick was molded in 1949.)

Brian Crecente

At first, Micki was based in South Korea working with companies there like Nexon. He tried setting up business connections in China from South Korea but didn't have much success. Micki explains.

Micki Fjeldgaard

We quickly discovered that trying to get into China or create experiences for the Chinese market was complicated to do from South Korea. And so we decided that it would be best to be completely local, and really, sort of like, get to understand the market and its unique facets by being in Shanghai.

Brian Crecente

So now in Shanghai, Micki began creating development footholds in China. But he quickly found that publishing a game in China isn't quite like it is in other parts of the world.

Micki Fjeldgaard

We didn't have a lot of internal knowledge about this. So the first many months was spent on just really understanding that. How is it different? How do you do things? And trying to then figure out who could best help us with that, in the case that we weren't able to directly publish ourselves. And that's where the search for a publishing partner started, as it became clear that it was quite difficult for a Western company to publish games in China on its own. And we ended up identifying Tencent as a suitable partner for that.

(Music plays)

Chapter 2: Tencent and NExT Studios – 06:53

Brian Crecente

Micki said that the LEGO Group spoke with at least 15 companies in China before deciding on Tencent, a massive Chinese technology company and one of the largest game publishers in the world. They then spent the next year or so essentially courting Tencent, as both a potential developer and publisher, for their still unnamed game project. That included both meetings in the United States at game conventions like E3 and meetings in China.

Micki Fjeldgaard

We had numerous interactions over the course of I want to say a year, where we tried to hone in on what would this game be and what would make sense for them, as well as for us, and the local market. And I remember that in the very beginning it was very much focused on being a role-playing game kind of thing, with heavy focus on combat and not

so much on creativity. So we then proceeded to spend maybe half a year really getting closer, much closer to one another, in regards to LEGO DNA, and how do we incorporate building and creativity into the game?

Ethan Vincent

Initially, Tencent and its team at NExT Studios had a very different idea for the game, and Micki spent a lot of time introducing the team at Tencent to some of the ideals and philosophies of the LEGO Group – and using those ideals to shape the game's development.

Micki Fjeldgaard

Natural sort of like first step was obviously to introduce them to our many guidelines and manuals or documentation as to what kind of ways do you present the minifigure? How do you animate the minifigure? How do you portray various types of conflict? How do you best deal with combat in a child-friendly game? And stuff like that. Following that, and sort of like getting a shared understanding of what this is, we then had multiple creative workshops, in Shenzhen in Tencent's office, around the game and explored various avenues as to how we could incorporate creativity and imagination into the game. And I remember in the first initial conversations there was a lot on the table, and some of the ones that resonated the best with all of us were things like, if you were in a combat scene that you could then instead of, you know, deploying your usual RPG shield, you would build a wall in front of you, and that wall would then have hit points and be able to take damage and therefore protect you. Building bridges to cross gaps in terrain and stuff like that, as well as providing, more or less unlimited creativity, in terms of crafting with various LEGO elements to build your tools or weapons, but out of individual components or individual LEGO bricks to make up sort of like the abilities that you would have and carry throughout the game.

Ethan Vincent

The original approach, Micki said, felt a bit like the sandbox building play of LEGO Worlds for mobile. But over time, the LEGO Group talked to Tencent and their development studio NeXT, about incorporating more creativity, choice, and building into the experience.

Micki Fjeldgaard

I think our focus and our wish was to make a game that would represent the LEGO Group the best possible way, and therefore incorporate a lot of building. And obviously, games like Roblox and Minecraft, have done that really well with open-ended crafting and building modes. And I think we wanted to create, not something that was the same, but had a similar feel in terms of being able to do what you want, explore where you want to go, and, you know, be more open-ended.

Brian Crecente

About 18 months after Micki Fjeldgaard moved to China and about six months into working with Tencent, Micki left China and handed the project off to his colleague, Ronny Scherer.

(Music plays)

Chapter 3: China and the APAC Market – 10:58

Brian Crecente

Now, before we dig into the development of LEGO Cube, I think it's important to take a bit of a break here and discuss China and Asia-Pacific – or as some people call it, APAC – and why the LEGO Group was putting so much effort into creating the game developed locally. What we want to do is sort of explain why the LEGO Group hadn't decided to just go ahead and release the games they'd already made, and what it was specifically about the Chinese market that made it so special. And there is no one better than Sean McEvoy, who currently heads up LEGO Games, to help explain that decision.

Sean McEvoy

The reason for that is that we want our gaming strategy to be as closely conjoined with our overall strategy for China and APAC as possible, and we recognize that a lot of our games portfolio was really crafted with a sort of Western audience in mind. And we really wanted to make sure that when we were thinking about games for China – specifically for Mainland China – that we were working with world-class developers and experts in the Chinese gaming space, to bring something that was going to be relevant to that audience as opposed to trying to sort of emulate gameplay or gaming experiences that we had created in the past that really, again, were, I think primarily for different regions, you know, and different audiences. We wanted to make something that was specifically for China.

(Music)

Ethan Vincent

LEGO bricks have been a beloved part of play for kids and adults for generations. That's not the case in China, though, where LEGO bricks didn't officially arrive until 1993 with the opening of a small third-party store in Beijing. In 2001, the company lined up an exclusive distributor from Mainland China, and 15 years later in 2016, the LEGO Group launched its first flagship store there, a gorgeous two-floor store by Disneyland in Shanghai. The LEGO Group now has four flagship stores in China and plans to greatly increase the number of stores there by the end of 2021. The company's expansion into China also includes growing digital efforts – and of course, video games. And that brings us back to Sean McEvoy.

Brian Crecente

So in terms of sort of big picture, how important is China to LEGO Games and the LEGO Group? And how important is LEGO Cube to that effort?

Sean McEvoy

Yeah, hugely important, both to the LEGO Group and certainly to LEGO Games. And I can really speak to it in terms of LEGO Games' strategy and our aspirations to be a games business that offers play experiences for the whole world, but also really focuses on the play experiences that are going to be most relevant and most appealing to audiences regionally. So that was why we decided to and had had the great opportunity to partner with Tencent on the creation of the creative sandbox title, LEGO Cube. And again, that initiative really was about bringing experiences that would be highly relevant and recognizable to a mainland Chinese audience of kids and families, and fans of the LEGO Group of all ages, via that great creative and gameplay experience. We wanted to double down on that notion of this has to be created in China and it has to be created for a Chinese audience.

Brian Crecente

And to do that the LEGO Group knew it needed to have someone on site, helping to build direct relationships with the developers in China and assemble a team in the country. In September 2017, the LEGO Group signed an agreement with Tencent to have them develop a creative sandbox game for release in China. It was the same fall that Micki Fjeldgaard handed off his position to Ronny Scherer.

Ronny Scherer

Back in 2016, 2017 when we started to explore the opportunity of releasing games that were LEGO-branded in China. At the time, we felt that the best way to address the Chinese audience was to make something in China with a Chinese team that would understand all the taste patterns and interests and navigate the industry landscape and the legislative landscape in China as a starting point.

Brian Crecente

As of 2020, China is the largest market in the world for video games, accounting for more than 27% of global revenue for the video game industry. That's 2% more than North America, which is now the second biggest, and 5% more than Asia-Pacific, which is the third largest. It's also important to note how quickly game industry revenue grew in China. In the past 10 years alone, total China game industry revenue grew by about 760%. And much of that growth is in mobile games.

Ronny Scherer

Basically, the games market – and I'm quoting roughly 2020 numbers – the games market in China in 2020 was roughly 80% mobile and 20% PC. It's a little more nuanced than that, but

console is essentially nonexisting, and mobile devices are ubiquitous, especially in the developed parts of mainland China. So it was kind of a no-brainer for us that if we wanted to reach kids and families, we would have to do something that was mobile first. Having said that, there is of course, a niche market for our traditional titles on console and PC and what have you, but it's just not a way to build a strong brand and reach as many children and families as possible. So mobile was kind of an obvious – like there was no other choice. And really, if you look at the development of the Chinese games industry, games have been around China for a long, long time. My team members in Shanghai talk about growing up playing games. These are people that are in their 30s and 40s today. So if you look at the chart of the size of the Chinese video game industry, going back to let's say, late 1990s when China started to open up, it did basically disappears as a flatline close to zero until the introduction of smart devices, and the iPhone in particular, and then you see the explosion of affordable Android devices that are able to play games, so mobile games really fueled their growth as well.

(Tune plays)

Chapter 4: Game Development – 17:45

Ethan Vincent

LEGO Cube was quite a monumental undertaking. It was ambitious and a creation designed to tick a lot of boxes. Ronny Scherer explains what the game was trying to accomplish.

Ronny Schererkl

LEGO Cube is an open-ended sandbox game that is best described as take the best of LEGO Worlds, combined with the best of Minecraft, and combine that with the best of Roblox, and then build it for mobile first. It sort of had these inherent LEGO values in its core design, which was all about creativity and open-ended play and exploration. And that combined with a platform of which players could make their own worlds and share those with the rest of the player community in an easy way from your mobile device.

Ethan Vincent

Tencent handed the project to its NeXT Studio, which is based in Shenzhen with an office in Shanghai. Ronny helped build a local LEGO Group team to support the Tencent developers.

Ronny Scherer

So that was kind of my main priority to begin with was one: Make sure that the NeXT studio team had what they needed in order to progress in terms of support for assets, approvals, guidance, you name it, whatever it takes to create a LEGO branded game, but also to identify and hire team members on our own site that would speak Chinese and understand

the games industry in China and, in that way, help us create a stronger connection between the LEGO Group and Tencent and NeXT Studio in Shenzhen, in particular. I remember clearly arriving in China for the first time. Like, this project was my actual first time visiting China, and so there was, of course, a lot of personal adjustments and trying to figure things out in a country that is completely foreign to me in so many aspects, from language, to culture, to food, to food safety, to just getting around in Shanghai that is this incredible metropolis, the size or even bigger than New York City. And so, the first stage was just to really figure out the ins and outs of navigating that and getting recruitment started. Between the fall of '17 and March of '18, when I recruited our first local employee in China, that was really the focus. Once we had Long on board, which was our first employee in China, the focus then onto actually getting the game developed, tested and prepared for launch as quickly as possible. So that took about another year and a half almost until August of '19 when the game soft launched.

Ethan Vincent

Among the first wave of LEGO Games' employees hired in China were Associate Product lead Nannan Li and Senior Product lead Long Cao. Nannan Li was already working with the LEGO Group as a graphic designer when Ronny started hiring for the LEGO Games team. Ronny came in like an invading force, Nannan said.

Nannan Li

He was almost like a one-man army landed in China from Billund. I remember that quite vividly. Yeah, like he has this very iconic hairstyle. So you see this Danish guy looking around and walking around in office, but apparently he was alone, which makes this no team and he talked with most of other departments and he was really friendly. And he loved to make friends and that's pretty much how I knew him. And then by then he said, 'OK, I'm here, new, I'm starting the new team in China,' and sooner or later he recruited Long, who was actually the first local hired employee of our LEGO Games team in China. And yeah, so that's how the team started slowly.

Ethan Vincent

Long Cao said his job at LEGO Games started with a phone call and a name drop.

Long Cao

I was called by headhunter, and she mentioned the name, the LEGO Group, and I was never thought the LEGO Group has been doing games and was set up in China, and I was super interested. And for another reason, which is I was a big fan of LEGO bricks. That was I couldn't have that much LEGO experiences during my childhood, but my son was around 12-years-old. I got him a lot of LEGO bricks, and two years later, he joined LEGO club team of his school. So we both are big fan of LEGO toy. And then I was super interested, and then I took the interview, talked to Ronny, and I found it so fascinating.

Brian Crecente

When both Nannan and Long started, LEGO Cube was still very much in the early stages of development. About 30 people were working on the game, which hadn't yet been announced. The game was officially unveiled in September 2018, about a year after Ronny moved to China. In the announcement, the LEGO Group called LEGO Cube the first game developed under the strategic partnership between the LEGO Group and Tencent, and noted that the game was expected to be publicly available by the end of 2018. With the release window now public, Nannan said the game's development and recruitment for the game's dev team sped up exponentially, eventually hitting about 70 employees.

Nannan Li

When I first came on board, that was right on the acceleration of the development. So my main responsibility was on work with the Tencent team on the daily basis, communication, basically looking at all the assets and the gameplay, and feature, and all the systems to make sure everything is in compliance with the LEGO standard. And of course, helping setting up the art direction and doing a lot of assets approval, and review and approval, commenting, and of course working with Long with the team, to make sure we have a LEGO-compliant game, and that's safe and fun to play with the kids. And also I help a lot on making sure the marketing assets and all the marketing campaign goes well, as well.

(Tune plays)

Ethan Vincent

Long Cao's focus as Senior Product Lead was managing the direction of the game and making sure that LEGO Cube met the LEGO Group's expectation for quality, fun, creativity, and safety. He said it was clear from the beginning that Tencent hoped to create a sandbox game that could rival the likes of Minecraft, something that has eluded the LEGO Group for years.

Long Cao

There are many, many types of sandbox games in this genre that all come from Minecraft, and it's getting super popular worldwide. And back then, there were a lot of developers from Tencent, they initiated the project and want to, you know, deliver a game in that genre. And when they built this prototype, people were saying, the LEGO Group is digital bricks, and it's a natural fit. We all feel that the LEGO Group has a true passion in bringing digital formats of LEGO bricks into game space, and this type of sandbox creation, sandbox UGC platform. So there is a natural fit. It's a natural fit.

(LEGO Cube open world survival gameplay sounds)

Ethan Vincent

Already a complex game, one designed to be mobile first and deliver an open sandbox to players who could build and share their own creations with friends, the game was also importantly meant to reflect not just the LEGO Group's values, but those of the Chinese market and its culture.

Long Cao

Considering the existing sandbox game, players in China are younger and not familiar with this UTC type of platform, we added a lot of tutorial, and make easier to get into. Mot like when you first time play Minecraft – you need to learn a lot, either ask a friend or you know, learn by yourself. Here in the game's design, it's really trying to lower the barrier, but it's not really with China-only thinking when making every design, it's fun, and it's working, let's put into the game.

(Tune plays)

Ethan Vincent

So, Brian, let's pause here and talk a little bit about the game and some of the cultural references that you can notice in the game. Long said that they include, you know, content that was inspired by Chinese literature, history, holidays like the Lunar New Year, and the Dragon Boat Festival, and Children's Day! There's just a load of things in there that are uniquely Chinese, wouldn't you say?

Brian Crecente

Yeah, you know, you're right. Also, and maybe this goes without saying, but obviously, everything in the game is in Chinese. And what that means is that there are no, absolutely no other additional sort of user interface considerations for other languages. And in general, there's just sort of this design aesthetic that is, I think familiar, or would be familiar to you if you've seen what sort of, you know, a traditional Chinese web page looks like. That means there's a lot more going on. It's a much more complex design. It's very busy design.

Ethan Vincent

So I think also, in addition to this design you're talking about and just kind of this saturated, you know, unique Chinese way of presenting information, there's also player events. I believe, they're around Chinese school holidays, and things like that where, you know, players can get together and throw these events.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, and of course the LEGO Group has always been very careful about safety measures and making sure what they create is something that parents would be comfortable with their children playing. In this case, China has a number of specific local sort of legislation,

regulations in terms of time limits, and things like that. And all of that's built into the game. It's something unusual. If you haven't played a game that's developed specifically for China, you wouldn't probably run into this typically.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, and you know, so what the LEGO Group has done, just to sort of reiterate, is instead of just creating a game that they want to release in China, they've gone to China, they've found a publisher, Tencent, and then with that publisher decided to work with them as a developer, Chinese developer, creating the game that is completely immersed in Chinese values, and Chinese culture, and Chinese design. And it's very obvious when you see the game. And at the same time, Tencent's NExT Studio had to make sure what it was creating was in compliance with the LEGO Group's own high standards and brand compliance rules. Nannan Li explains.

Nannan Li

We have very high standard of quality in terms of art, and how the LEGO elements, the minifigures, all the bricks, and have to be represented in a certain way. And this is very new to the NExT Studio, the Tencent team. So on this part, the whole brand compliance part really took us quite a long time to get it right. And indeed, we did a lot of rounds of iterations and changes and find what is exactly the right color of the LEGO bricks. And what is exactly the right texture of all these plastics and especially how the brick's proportion have to count exactly one-to-one with minifigures. And you don't have to – you cannot size up and size down these randomly as just treat as general cubicles. So that took quite a journey, a learning curve from both of us, but eventually, I think they really got it correct. And they made really high quality art for the whole game, which both of us are very proud of that.

Brian Crecente

Ronny said he was impressed with the level commitment the studio showed as it worked to capture an elusive formula – making a game that is meant to be essentially, Minecraft meets Roblox, on a mobile platform infused with LEGO Group and Chinese values.

Ronny Scherer

Here's the thing that I learned from doing this compared to any other game I've worked with on the West: The commitment and the velocity of how things came together. There was a long lead up with prototypes and things prior to actually kicking off the project, but from the actual, now we go into production, to the game was done, I've never experienced anything like it in my career. Like, that just happened really, really fast. And the team was incredibly committed and hard working, more than I've seen anywhere else in the world. That meant, of course, that the game was getting quite mature quite quickly. That is sort of a phrase that people sometimes use, you know, that is China's speed. Things are happening at China's speed. And that is kind of, you know, when the train leaves the

platform, it just runs really fast. There's of course, that comes with some other challenges, like making sure that you're on the right tracks, or that you're going in the right direction, because you're moving fast. And so any error in that, of course, will take you to the wrong place, or maybe a better place than you anticipated, but it will move you very quickly. I really enjoyed to be part of that and witnessed that. Of course the NExT Studio team did all the heavy lifting, and we were kind of just trying to remove as many impediments and help them as much as possible.

(Tune plays)

Brian Crecente

Development on the game and incorporating the LEGO DNA into a game created outside of the company in a new region for the company, also came with some interesting lessons, Ronny said.

Ronny Scherer

There was quite a interesting journey to try and make sure that all of our wonderful values and ideals for the brand and the LEGO DNA was sort of translated in the best way possible into both the Chinese language but also Chinese culture. And to sort of figure out like, how does all of the things that we aspire to do globally, how does that apply or not? Or how do we adjust that or not to the Chinese context?

Ethan Vincent

The team did a number of closed tests for LEGO Cube and then the game was soft launched on August 8, 2019, an auspicious date in China because the number eight is considered lucky. And that luck seemed to hold, at least for a while.

Ronny Scherer

LEGO Cube and soft launch has done phenomenally well by our standards. It's been consistently in the top three performing titles in terms of reach and engagement.

(Sounds from LEGO Cube game)

Ethan Vincent

Currently, the game features four major modes. In survival mode, players explore the world, collect materials, and craft tools they use to create other items that help them survive. Then there is the user-generated content platform, which allows players to create their own experiences in games inside the game, and then invite players to come and play the game with them. The third mode is creation mode that gives players plenty of open space, all of the bricks they want, and allows them to build anything they can imagine. The final mode is parties, which features the LEGO Park, a land where you can build your house and

live a minifig life. What the game doesn't feature, at least not yet, is any way to make money, That's because it still hasn't officially launched yet.

Chapter 5: Business in China – 34:24

Ethan Vincent

To understand why LEGO Cube remains, essentially, still half-launched now nearly two years since it first went live, you need to understand China – specifically how businesses operate there and how games are published. Ronny Scherer explains.

Ronny Scherer

In order to release a game with a foreign brand in China, you need to acquire two different kinds of permits. One is an ISBN license that's akin to an ISBN license in the West for releases of books and what have you. The second part is a publishing license, which you cannot, for either of them, acquire that as a foreign company. You need to be a Chinese-owned entity in order to apply for and receive those permits.

(Tune plays)

Brian Crecente

To obtain those licenses in China, a company has to go through companies that the local government trusts will respect Chinese culture and local regulation. That's true of anything that conveys any sort of message to the public or allows the public to communicate with one another. But internet culture products are considered even more sensitive. A game like LEGO Cube needs this prior approval but can, in some cases, still be soft launched to the public for testing, as long as it follows the regulatory requirements and does not charge its players without all of the approvals.

Now drop into this complex release system a change that hit in early 2018 when there was an organizational restructure within the group that led the approval process. That led to a temporary freeze in the authorization of new game licenses, which lasted for the rest of the year. And then in 2019, China enacted new laws regulating video game playing time for minors, which also has to be addressed in game design.

While the approval process is once again active, the change in regulation and licensing has created some challenges for games not yet approved, and a longer delay for those seeking approval. Essentially, there's a line to get approval, and LEGO Cube is still waiting in it.

Ronny Scherer

So right now, our goal is to find a way to sustain the game for long enough that we'll be able to monetize it eventually, to ensure that we also deliver value back to Tencent, who's

been a great partner on this, and of course is investing significantly in this joint effort to reach the Chinese audience.

Ethan Vincent

The LEGO Group's Sean McEvoy says that there aren't any current plans to release LEGO Cube outside of Mainland China.

Sean McEvoy

I think one thing that has really been evident to us as a team, and via our partnership with Tencent, is that there are tremendous learnings in terms of play experiences that could be broadly extensible worldwide to an audience of fans of LEGO play anywhere in the world, that those learnings that we were able to experience on via the creation of LEGO Cube, they do not have to stay exclusive to mainland China, they're extensible worldwide, and so even if the game stays within the borders of mainland China, we really feel like there are global benefits to that experience in social creative play, and in bringing world-class experiences of child safety, and structures for fair and transparent monetization. All of those were aspects of LEGO Cube's development that we partnered very closely with Tencent on, and as a team we learned a tremendous amount that we really do feel like will be extensible to the broader business into many audiences worldwide.

(Music plays)

Chapter 6: LEGO Cube Live – 38:11

Ethan Vincent

For now, the LEGO Group, publisher Tencent, and its team NExT Studios are maintaining the game in its current state. A big part of that effort is the game's ability to allow players to create their own content, something that Tencent keeps a close eye on to ensure it's appropriate before it can be viewed by other players. Nannan said the company also regularly hosts community events such as competitions, which help players remain active and encourage more user-created content. The result has been some inspiring creations, she said.

Nannan Li

There was one player, his daytime job is a firefighter, and he is, he is a sandbox creator, and he really loves to play with our game. So he created a series of minigames in LEGO Cube to, not say teach, but more like educational and teaching on the safety instructions of once and how you escape from the fire, and all those firefighter locations and the stories, scenarios played in the game. So that was quite fun. Yeah, and I think I believe also, he made some videos by combining some LEGO toy as physical toy animation and some in-game play and simulation in the fire section, how the firefighter council save you and all the

safety instructions and all together. So that was a quite interesting piece. They are actually quite a lot of different minigames you can create within a LEGO Cube platform. The adventure – roleplay adventure, there's a lot of puzzle, like you solve some quiz, and a lot of running games, and also a lot of kind of shooting, of course kids love shooting (chuckles).

Ethan Vincent

Long Cao has a few favorite creations from the game as well.

Long Cao

Yeah, I made one creation. That's, it's my favorite part to introduce to my colleagues and friends. So I build a castle. And I also add a story. It's an action game. You control knights, and to fight the monsters and the save the princess in the end, who is trapped in the castle. So you can learn a lot of ways how to build a castle with a bridge built of elements, surround it, and also you can control the knights, then you can control where monsters will come and also how you interact with the elements. It's really fun part. So yeah, that is my favorite part. But in a game – you know, many, many diversified games in terms of genre: You got racing game, there are action games, and also there are some platform jumping game. and also there are RPG games, puzzle-solving games. It's like what we always say: The only limitation is your imagination.

Ethan Vincent

Now Brian, you were pretty lucky because you got to play the game – download it. I've only been viewing these YouTube clips of individuals playing the game and just get a little insight that way, and it's pretty amazing to look at, just kind of a beautiful game with lots of recognizable things that you obviously, you know, know from other games, but it was just really cool to see it and to watch people play there. What was it like to play the game?

Brian Crecente

Yeah. So, first off, again, this is a game that was designed to only be available in China. And what that means for someone who's not in China is to get this game, what you have to do is create an account in China. Because I've been doing this for so long, I have accounts all over the world, and so yeah, I hopped into my account in China, downloaded the game, and obviously the first thing I noticed was everything's in Chinese. That's sort of a no-brainer, but one of the things that's interesting is, so I'm going through this and sort of having to guess what I have to do to create my minifig, which is sort of your first step, and like proceed. And one, it's this is a really weird little tiny thing, but it's something noticeable. A lot of times when you play games in Europe and in North America, the button, there's usually two button choices, right? You know, you could say yes or no, essentially. And the button, the yes button, is usually green, and the no button's usually

red. Well, in LEGO Cube, the button that you want to click to keep moving forward is orange. Again, a minor thing, but you know, that right there sort of underscores the fact that there's a lot of different things, beyond just obviously the language, that go into the design. But yeah, so when you first start, you kind of create your own little minifig. And then it has to go through a couple of tutorials. Then you can eventually get into the different modes. So yeah, the mode that I've been messing around with most has been sort of this open world mode that, if you've played Minecraft, will look very familiar to you.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, for sure. I was noticing that as well. Just you know, you have all the terrain that's very similar. And you can, I believe, go into water and you can go into caves, and just it looks very similar, but it's unique in its LEGO brick nature, isn't it?

Brian Crecente

Yeah, you know, it's funny, because there's a couple of things I noticed. So first off, there is built into it an ability to switch between first-person and third-person. But yeah, so you – one of the things you do is you sort of wander around this landscape, like right now my character has a club in his hand, and what I'm looking at right now is this big open – these plains, sort of fields with bits of grass poking up. And what they've done for the design, instead of it just being constant studs, what it is is it looks like it's sort of flat, except every once in a while you'll have an area that has, I don't know, like a little collection of four studs or eight studs or 16 studs sticking up. Anyway, so you can go up to like, let's say this tree, there's a tree here, and I can start smacking the tree. And as I smack it a little meter starts to fill. And once that meter is completely full, it's taking this whole time to do this, what happens is the tree disappears, and a whole bunch of stuff drops, and my character immediately picks it up. When it drops, it looks like a whole bunch of little one-by-one LEGO pieces, and they all sort of fall directly into my inventory. And if I go into my inventory, I'll see that I now have 23 white LEGO studs along with all these other things. So I can go around knocking things down. I can also dig straight down into the ground. And one of the things I used to love doing in Minecraft was basically tunneling and finding all these caves and everything. All that's in there. You'll find like a lot of little LEGO creatures running around. Like there's this little spider here that I recognize from theme sets I've built, there's goats, but you know again, this is just one of the modes. You can also go into other modes.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, like the survivor mode and other things like that. I think what's so cool about the design is like what you said is, it wasn't just kind of a one-to-one translation say, you know, let's put everything down with studs and make it so, you know, LEGO DNA strong, but let's find ways to create a unique aesthetic and to create kind of a polished design on top of it. And it feels that way, and I remember when, you know, I was watching the videos of creating tunnels and caves and you would also find precious kind of gems and things like

that that you can put in your inventory and save, and use for other things obviously. And it was all built in this very sleek-looking design, so you weren't overwhelmed by just looking at studs the whole time and going like, "I get it. We are in a open LEGO world," you know what I mean? But it's done very, very well and of course the lighting and the shading and the sheen on each of those kind of shiny, flat surfaces all kind of play together. It's quite remarkable.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, one of the things that, you know, we've talked to a lot of designers, obviously, over the last year or two about how they sort of translate LEGO aesthetic and LEGO DNA into a video game. And there's a lot of approaches, but I think the approach they took here is really sort of fascinating because it's not a world made entirely of LEGO bricks. So for instance, the sky is the sky. It's not a LEGO sky. The sun isn't made out of LEGO bricks, it's just – and I'm looking – as we're talking the sun is setting and the sky has turned like a beautiful sort of peach color. And I could see the sun, as with Minecraft, time travels a little faster in this world, and I can actually see the sun sort of going down, I'm standing in front of this river, and the water is sort of looks like beautiful, shimmering water. And I could see the reflection of the sun setting. And there's like these wavy reflections of LEGO houses and LEGO trees, and it's gorgeous! And like that wouldn't work if you wanted to make the whole thing LEGO bricks, I think you need to figure out where you want to use that and where you shouldn't. I think that this is the sort of game that, you know, and Sean talks about this in a few minutes as we wrap up this episode, but this is the sort of game that whether or not it leaves China, cannot help but bring with it, its design, bring with it, sort of a lot of lessons for the LEGO Group. And I really hope that those lessons will sort of spread out to future designs, and future games.

Chapter 7: Lessons Learned – 48:19

Sean McEvoy

Regardless of what the future may bring, in that regard, we do still feel like the learnings that we've experienced LEGO Cube and the great partnership that we've established with Tencent, it's provided tremendous value to us back as a business and as a team, and really paved the way for what's to come in mainland China, and in APAC more broadly.

Brian Crecente

In Ronny's mind, a big part of LEGO Cube was not just the journey and research into how to navigate the Chinese market, but also learning how that fits into a global marketplace.

Ronny Scherer

I find it really fascinating that the scale of things today have reached a point where it's incredibly hard to sustain smaller products and services, especially as the type of company and brand that we are, and at the scale that we operate. To do something small within a single territory, even if it's the size of China is next to impossible. It's difficult to compete and get the economy of scale that a true global title or platform offers. That has been quite eye opening. Another important lesson that we've learned is understanding how the value creation works in a constrained environment like that. How do we make sure that we create a service where both the creators – the operator of the service, and we as the brand owner – all benefit from each other's contributions? How do we allow players to somehow pay for an experience that they're enjoying, in a fair and transparent way? Nothing really comes for free. And as a brand, we don't really want to go in the direction where players, kids and families in particular, have to pay with their personal information or through advertising. You know, business models, where consumers get the perception that they're getting something for free, which of course is never really the case? Finding that balance has and continues to be a real challenge. And working on a tight constraint while experimenting with new approaches, some that worked and some that didn't, has been really valuable for us as a team.

Long Cao

Yeah, it's hard to add anything specific. I've been working on this project since I joined LEGO Games and work together with Tencent. They have a team of 70 people. They are really young, energetic, and they are really, really skillful and a talented people from industry. I can feel the passion of the team, the hard work, the focus. It's a lot of good memories.

Nannan Li

And I think this game itself is really great, a huge engagement for the LEGO brand with players and kids in China because, let's say, compared with other Western countries, LEGO as a toy brand is fairly new for Chinese consumers and players. And we all know for our toy consumers and also for the younger players, kids are very busy these days. They have very little time and playing games on the mobile especially, but for our game, that I remember at the peak time, average daily play time per players is over one hour, which means, yes, so many players and kids they spend over more than one hour to play on our game and engage with LEGO brand and with LEGO bricks, and all this fun part in this game, which was very impressive. I'm really happy to see we finally bring a LEGO title and fully developed for China in Chinese market. This is a really big learning for all of us, for our team, in terms of how to develop a really authentic LEGO-minded game for the Chinese market and for the Chinese players.

(Postscript music)

Bits N' Bricks: Credits – 52:23

Ethan Vincent

Bits N' Bricks is made possible by LEGO Games. Your hosts are Brian Crecente and Ethan Vincent. Producing by Dave Tach. Our executive producer is Ronny Scherer. Creative direction and editing by Ethan Vincent. Research and writing by Brian Crecente. Art direction by Nannan Li. Graphics and animations by Manuel Lindinger and Andreas Holzinger. Mixing and sound design by Dan Carlisle. Disclaimer voice is Ben Unguren. Opening's child voice is Milo Vincent. Music by Peter Priemer, foundermusic.com, excerpts from the game LEGO Cube, and Henrik Lindstrand from the award-winning game LEGO Builder's Journey, which you can play on Apple Arcade, Windows PC, and Nintendo Switch. We'd like to thank our participants: Long Cao, Micki Fjeldgaard, Nannan Li, Sean McEvoy, and Ronny Scherer. We'd also like to thank Tencent Games and the entire LEGO Games team. For questions and comments, write us at bitsnbricks@LEGO.com. That's bits, the letter N, then bricks@LEGO.com. And as always, stay tuned for more episodes of Bits N' Bricks.

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